



queen of the world

A MALAYSIAN ORIGINAL MUSES
ABOUT LEGENDS, FAME, FORTUNE,
FAMILY AND AN INDUSTRY BESOTTED
WITH THE BOTTOM LINE

BY CH Loh



'When you hear music it has to touch an emotion, that's why it's called art'

SHE'S A HOUSEHOLD name, the Ratu of R&B no less, who redefined local music and made it relevant for the times, introducing words that had long disappeared from the vocabulary of our industry: originality, creativity, experimentation.

Jazz and blues, Latin rhythms (even before it became synonymous with shaking your bon bons), a twist of new wave, ethnic sounds, doo-wop girls; collaborations with the diverse likes of Paul Ponnudurai, Michael Veerapen, Indra Lesmana, Fauzi Marzuki, Jenny Chin, Mac Chew and many others – Sheila Majid can justly be credited as one of the pioneers who jolted brass ears out of provincial mediocrity.

She became a sensation in Japan, won the hearts of the Indonesians and even tackled London. Yet it's taken 20 years for her to grace the stage of one of World Music's premier events, the internationally acclaimed WOMAD Festival founded by Peter Gabriel in 1982.

Catching up with Sheila in Singapore the day before her gig on the final night of WOMAD Singapore in August took this interviewer back 15 years, into the murky past where the unexpected appearance of her single *Bunyi Guitar* (in a club that I will not, for the sake of the saintly and morally righteous, name) shimmied from the loudspeakers, past Kylie and Madonna, to become something of an occasion on the dance floor.

Fast forward to 2005, and the cheeky twist of *Bunyi Guitar* still gets people on their feet, as the crowds at WOMAD 2005 testify, coming instantly to dance and cheer only when Sheila steps on stage.

Backtrack a day, Sheila looking relaxed and visibly excited to be here. My audience with the Queen starts off as if amongst old friends meeting for the first time after long separation.

OFF THE EDGE: LET'S START WITH WOMAD. WHY HAS IT TAKEN SO LONG FOR YOU TO COME ON BOARD?

SHEILA: I also don't know! In fact I was invited last year, but I was expecting and already in my seventh month [of pregnancy]. So although I was still singing in KL, my doctor wouldn't allow it... But WOMAD extended the invitation again this year so I'm more than happy!

IS THIS THE START OF YOU APPEARING AT OTHER WOMAD FESTIVALS AROUND THE WORLD?

I hope so! I first heard about WOMAD 10 years ago, when my colleague Zainal performed on it in Japan. I am very excited to be here!

PERHAPS WE CAN REWIND A BIT. I THINK WE TEND TO TAKE YOU FOR GRANTED – YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN RATU, BUT HOW MUCH DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT WHERE YOU CAME FROM?

Take me for granted? You mean you tend to forget me? (laughs)

Well, I started [singing] professionally in 1983, but I cut my first album in 1985, so if you take it from that point I'm celebrating my 20th anniversary this year! And we have some plans regarding this...

Twenty years in the music industry is a long time – you've got to really like it [to survive]. And I do; I enjoy what I do and that keeps me going. And the fans have been wonderful; they've been behind me all along and that's why I'm still here today.

IN THOSE DAYS DID YOU EVER IMAGINE YOU'D BE THIS BIG?

I never even imagined that I would be a singer. I come from a family of eight and I'm the youngest. And 20 years ago, to start a career in music was a no-no! It wasn't something 'concrete'. You know, people tend to say that the music business is 'not stable'. I got into it by accident.

But I was exposed to music from a young age. I had classical piano lessons when I was four, even before I went to school. In my family, everybody loves music even though no one did it professionally. I was exposed to all kinds of music – I had brothers listening to the Rolling Stones, Earth Wind and Fire, Diana Ross – and being the youngest, I always ended up listening to their music!

But my favourite was Motown. I had a soft spot for that and my style is very much influenced by that Motown sound – the Temptations, the Supremes, Stevie Wonder.

WHO WAS YOUR R&B HEROINE?

At that time? Michael Jackson lah!

ERR... MICHAEL, A HEROINE?

(Laughs) Well at that time we thought he was a hero. He was with The Jackson 5 and they were brilliant. And together with Stevie Wonder they are, until today, my idols. And also Diana Ross. I love her style.

YOUR FIRST ALBUM DIMENSI BARU BROKE THE MOULD, DIDN'T IT?

It was a big challenge. I had to argue with so many people in the industry... 'Either I do this or not at all.' As usual, record labels want to sell, and what sells is what they want to do. At that time, dangdut and heavy metal rock were really hot.

And I can't do heavy metal rock, neither can I do dangdut. They can force me to do it but I will probably just sing it and destroy it! I said, 'I want to do music like this.' And showed them all the music that I listened to. And they said, 'Cannot, cannot, this is Mat Salleh music! There's no market here,' and all that.

One day I remembered listening to this singer from Indonesia, Vina Panduwinata, who had this really nice style which is a bit jazzy, and it was in Malay. So I told them, 'Why can't we do it like this?'

And if you listen to *Dimensi Baru* there's a song, *Dia*, that's a remake from Vina's album, because I liked it so much. And I wanted it to be on my album because that was the starting point of how my music was going to be.

The song that [the label] picked for my first single was *Pengemis Muda*, which I hated. But it became a hit! As long as people bought the album because of *Pengemis Muda*, then eventually they were going to listen to the other songs, and that's how those other songs caught on. So by the time we did the second album (*Emosi*, 1986) we could then do something 'heavier'. It was like trying to persuade and educate people.

And I was lucky that the timing was right – if I had done it a few years earlier, it probably wouldn't have been so acceptable. A few years later, there would be so many people doing the genre.

NO, I THINK YOU SET THE TREND. AT THE TIME NO ONE WAS DOING ANYTHING CLOSE TO IT.

It was a risk, but thank God it worked out! I think the younger generation also wanted a change; we had people who were so exposed to all kinds of music that they were the sort who didn't listen to the normal Malay pop in the market. So when [my albums] came out, it was like a breath of fresh air.

We had a niche, and we still have a niche – people who don't really listen to local music but who will listen to my albums, which is great!

BY THE TIME YOUR THIRD ALBUM WARNA CAME ALONG IN 1988, DO YOU THINK PEOPLE HAD ACCEPTED YOUR STYLE?

Yes! And so with *Warna* we decided to be a bit more experimental. At that time, all this new technology was coming out, you know... music programming, so we decided to put that into the album. But after doing that album I realised that I still preferred music being played live by a human being. I think if I did all those electronic things today, it wouldn't be happening...

YEAH, THOSE WERE THE 80S AND THE TIME OF NEW WAVE.

Right, so when it came to the 90s when we did *Legenda*, we had the orchestra, with strings and all that, and I loved it.

WHOSE IDEA WAS IT TO DO P RAMLEE?

This is how it all started. P Ramlee had made great movies, which everyone still enjoys [even after repeated viewing]. But he was a great composer too, and I noticed people were beginning to forget that.

Like when I watched the videos with my nieces and nephew; when you come to the songs, they all hit the fast-forward button! (laughs) I can understand why – these children were listening to 80s music, which was so much more sophisticated. Why would they want to listen to something made in the 50s?

So they fast-forwarded it, and I thought, this is so sayang – after a while they are going to forget his music. Which is when I had



'Take all this reality programmes... If we can put our two cents worth on SMS then we'll just send, send, send!'

the idea: why don't I redo his music but just extract his melodies – because his melodies are beautiful—and add an arrangement that suits today's listeners?

It was a risk, a challenge. Even before *Legenda* came out people were saying, 'How could Sheila Majid do this? She's going to destroy the songs and our heritage...'

But I was adamant because I did not want his music to be forgotten, and the only way to get the youth to listen to his music again was to make it suitable for their ears. So that's how *Legenda* happened, and thank God it came out okay. It became my bestselling album in Malaysia and Indonesia!

IN ENGLISH-EDUCATED CIRCLES, IT WAS CONSIDERED UNCOOL TO LISTEN TO MALAY OR CHINESE SONGS, BUT WHEN I PLAYED MY NEWLY ACQUIRED LEGENDA CD (ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS IN MY FLEDGLING AND VERY MODEST CD COLLECTION) TO MY UNIVERSITY FRIENDS, EVERYONE WANTED ONE!

And you know, there were many people who did not know of P Ramlee before. After *Legenda* they went, 'Wow, who's this man?' and started looking up his old albums. He was a great songwriter; he still has so many songs.



It's been 20 years since her first album, *Dimensi Baru*, which broke the mould and placed Sheila as one of the pioneers who jolted brass ears out of provincial mediocrity

COULD IT BE AN ERA THAT HAS PAST? IS MALAYSIA SO BARREN TODAY THAT IT CANNOT NOURISH NEW P RAMLEES?

I don't think it's just Malaysia; it's the whole world. Today, it's all about money. Sometimes it compromises artistic integrity. It's very frustrating.

For all we know, P Ramlee in his time had a free hand. Today there are so many people who are so clever; sometimes they're not even in the business or it's not even their expertise, but they want to put in their two cents' worth, because they're someone big 'up there'. It's happening in sports as well, don't you think so?

It's such a shame. Sometimes I wish they would just take their finger out of things they don't know about, you know what I mean? It's like asking what I think about politics, but what do I know? I can put in my two cents' worth of my opinion, but it doesn't mean I'm correct.

And at the end of the day it's all about what sells; it is about demand and supply. It's very frustrating. That's why I said you've got to really like this business to be in it!

SO WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE MUSIC BUSINESS THAT YOU DO REALLY LIKE?

I love singing, I love music. It's an outlet, an expression. When you hear music it has to touch an emotion, that's why it's called art. Like when you look at a painting – okay, not me lah, but someone who understands painting – it brings tears to their eyes. We're losing that.

Today when you listen to the radio, is there anything that sticks in your head? It's easily forgotten, right? Whereas dulu-dulu, music sticks because the melodic content is so rich, everything is done from the heart, out of the love, not just because it's going to make money.

And if you think you want to join the music industry here and think that you're going to be rich, then I suggest you find another career. You have to deal with piracy; people can download music... You have to really love the art to sustain yourself.

I find that the appreciation of people towards music now is so low. Not that I want to put anyone down, but you know what I mean.

SO DID YOU EVER CONSIDER A SECOND P RAMLEE ALBUM?

No, I had such a lot of flak from that and I thought that was enough. Anyway, right after I did *Legenda* there were ten thousand other people who did re-recordings of his music, and some of them were just not happening. Jump on the bandwagon lah, because it's hot, kan!

That's the mentality of our people, sorry to say. Like when nasyid sells, all of a sudden all these nasyid groups come out. I mean, be original lah! But these are all the [record company] labels I am talking about, not the artists.

IN WARNA, THE ALBUM PRECEDING LEGENDA, THERE WAS ALSO A REMAKE, WASN'T THERE? I RECALL JELINGAN MANJA, WHICH CLOSED THE ALBUM AND SORT OF PROPHESED THE COMING OF LEGENDA.

Yes! That was our starting point, to check and see whether people would like it. It was not a P Ramlee song though, I can't remember whose [song it is], but Saloma sang it. And yes, people liked it. (People more than liked it – the audiences went wild when *Jelingan Manja* came up at her gig the next evening.)

TALKING ABOUT P RAMLEE AS A LEGEND, WHY DO YOU THINK NO ONE ELSE LIKE HIM HAS EMERGED IN RECENT YEARS?

He's one of a kind... he's a genius. There's no one else like P Ramlee.

Just take all these reality programmes – what is the intention behind it [all]? Making money? If so, then yes, they are doing it very well, successfully. [But] if you think you are nurturing the industry, then I don't think so. It's just a money-making gadget.

It's not wrong; everyone wants to make money. But sometimes we also have to think before we really lose it.

And it's also the listeners. We're all human, right? If we can put our two cents' worth on SMS then we'll just send, send, send! It's all sympathy votes. I'm not saying that it's wrong; it's all fun.

But I am true to my trade and I love what I am doing. And I am trying to make this music industry something that can sustain someone's career, that can bring income into the country, that can create bonds between people, like this WOMAD Festival. Music has always been associated with peace and love.

FUNNY HOW WE HAVE NEVER HAD ANYTHING LIKE WOMAD IN MALAYSIA, ISN'T IT?

It's because I don't think they think it's important. They only think it's important when they want to raise funds! Then they will ask us to sing for free. All the time! They don't realise that we have costs to bear, and we can't do it for free. Okay, maybe I can sing for free, but not my musicians... it's not fair, they have kids to feed.

I think the best time for our music was in the 80s. That was when music was really flourishing around the world. What do you think?

I THINK YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT ABOUT THE 80S...

(Laughs) Not that I'm an old bag... But today the art is gone. Turn on the radio pun malas. Nothing sticks to you anymore.

COMING BACK TO 2005, HAS MOTHERHOOD CHANGED YOUR ARTISTIC OUTLOOK?

No, it has made it richer, with the experiences that I have had, the maturity that comes with it. I'm having a great life now, and I thank God for the talent which is His gift. With it I can earn a living. I'm doing something that I love, I've managed to bring up my children and still do music today. And my fans are still there.

HOW DO YOU JUGGLE IT ALL – MOTHER, SINGER, BUSINESSWOMAN?

I am not Superwoman, I have a lot of people to help me! I cannot do it alone. I have a great husband, and I have my mother still, and my maid and manager and lots of people to help me [with the day to day affairs] so I can concentrate on the important things. And the fans... they've been there and I'm very grateful to them... and some of them now work with me, some have become my friends.

And I work from home, so the children can run up and down you know – it's a bit of madness and chaos, but I can still deal with it.

But if I ever had to choose, it is definitely family. Being Asian, I guess, we're brought up this way. I would drop my career there and then.

WHAT IF TEN YEARS FROM NOW YOUR KIDS TELL YOU, MA, I WANT TO BE A SINGER?

Okay, if that's where their interest lies, we'll pursue it.

Right now, my children take piano lessons and go to Mandarin school. Being able to speak and write Mandarin is an asset. Not everyone will be a Straight-As student, so as a parent you must be able to teach them the art of survival, because that's what's important in life.

I can already see where their interests are going, so right now basic education is a priority at least until Form 5. Mandarin busuk-busuk (pidgin Mandarin) also can get you through as a tourist guide in Beijing, do you know what I mean? It's a basic skill.

THERE'S NEWS IN THE WIND OF AN ENGLISH ALBUM IN THE MAKING?

Oh yes! I'm planning one. A lot of people have been asking me about it. I was signed up with a label [whose bosses] said, 'No, this is a Malay market, English won't sell, etc.' But right now albums don't sell anyway, right? They can be downloaded everywhere. I'm on my own now—I just need to find the finance, and hopefully it will be out next year! ■



POCO A POCO (BIT BY BIT) SHEILA WOMADNESS

Where once lovers lingered and peeping toms lurked, Singapore's Fort Canning Hill, a lush park spectacularly poised over Orchard and harbouring history that was best avoided in light of the Month of Hungry Ghosts, the usually quiet oasis amidst the city's ratrace madness burst once again with the sounds of music from as distant as Timbuktu (literally, in the form of the Saharan sensation Tinariwen) in August.

The WOMAD Festival has become a permanent establishment here since it first beached ashore Singapore in 1998. And in all this time finding a local act in the programme has been more difficult than locating the proverbial needle in the haystack. But this year, gone is the obligatory Chinese Orchestra, and Singapore herself has several real artists to add to the lineup.

Malaysia, who has seen at least several acts grace the WOMAD World Stage, had her honour defended by the scintillating Sheila Majid. The local press speculated her invitation to be a deliberate attempt by the organisers to pull in the crowds, a strange sort of compliment Singapore-style no doubt, but one which Sheila must obviously enjoy.

Recalling the early days of WOMAD Singapore, which was really madness – dashing from one performance stage to another and ducking into the workshops, along the way trying not to step on a party lounging on the lawns or crashing into another beer-guzzling mob – this year's turnout was surprisingly thin.

Having no need to scour for an empty spot on the grassy slope that poised perfectly in front of the main stage, I found the crowd

lazing about as the Punjabi group Dhol Foundation from the UK tried their darndest to dole out the Dhol beats in decibels that would have otherwise stirred the dead, all in vain.

Perhaps it was the heat. Maybe folks were wary of the 7th Month after all, and did not want to be presumed to have gone into involuntary possession, of which the waving of arms and jumping around typical of a WOMAD audience at its peak is a sure sign.

My doubts evaporated as the Dhol blokes quietly exited and Sheila Majid burst onto stage, amidst a thin but present cheer. An initially modest group of fans ran to the front, amongst them noticeably mat sallehs, to sing and dance along with the Diva. As her all-too-short 40-minute set progressed the crowds slowly grew. In front of me no one could sit still, two Spanish girls with Heinekens in hand waved and gyrated to the beat as the doyen of R&B relived some of her greatest hits.

Sheila's slick performance proves that her old standards still deliver a punch, as her *Legenda* medley met with screams of delight show, although the pinnacle was surely reserved for *Jelingan Manja*, *Warna* and *Sinaran*.

A more understated triumph was surely *Kau*, from her 2004 album *Cinta Kita*, brimming with Indonesian chic mixed with a good measure of what we have come to love about Sheila's style – a great song with a great hook. It augurs well for an artist in her 20th year in business.

I would have got up and danced had it not been for my journalist's gear and the ridiculous-looking hospital tags that they made the media put on their wrists, lest I be mistaken for an escaped patient from Changi Hospital. But my feet tapped all the same, oblivious to its master busy at work. And that's what great music does.